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Move Over, Soccer Moms

Angus heifer moms are not so rare a breed.

by Barb Baylor Anderson

Although my mom didn't drive a minivan full of kids, soccer balls and cold drinks around during the summer, she did haul me to cattle shows and made sure I had everything I needed. She was a heifer mom before there was a name for it. And like many of the heifer moms of her era, her work was in the background, doling out support, recording class winners during the shows and keeping my grandpa in line with his critique so there was peace during the ride home.

Today's heifer moms are no different, and yet they are very different. Today's heifer moms still take on the traditional role, but these multitasking women also can coordinate everything from lunch detail, moral support and social events to registration and health-paper detail, grooming instruction and even parking a trailer. These women represent a new breed of heifer moms.

Not that dads aren't important. They are. "But only a heifer mom would

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► Today's multitasking heifer moms coordinate everything from lunch detail, moral support and social events to registration and health-paper detail, grooming instruction and even parking a trailer.



► If you look in the Taylors' showbox, you are just as likely to find a mirror, deodorant and a can of hairspray as you are a screwdriver, says heifer mom Susan (McMahon) Taylor, Lavaca, Ark. "Dads don't always think about that stuff."

feed her kids a snack in the car after working with cattle all day, and realize after the snack is gone that the kids didn't wash their hands first," says Susan (McMahon) Taylor, Lavaca, Ark., labeled a heifer mom by her sister, Julie. "I have the girls wash their hands anyway after the snack is gone, and it absolves me of all guilt."

Susan and her husband, Rick, have four daughters: Claire, 12, twins Christine and Audrey, 9, and Madeline, 7. Susan grew up where Angus cattle are synonymous with Belle Point Ranch. Rick grew up in town, but he spent time on his grandparents' farm as a child.

"I wanted to be a heifer mom," Susan says. "When Claire was 9 and she got her first heifer, I realized how much I missed being involved with showing cattle because I had been so involved with childbearing and rearing. Now I can work with the girls doing something they love, and Rick can golf once in a while when we go to the ranch."

Tips from a professional heifer mom

Sue Witt is heifer mom to more than 20 kids in Gilmer, Texas. While they don't carry the Witt name, Sue considers them part of her family. As Gilmer High School FFA advisor and agricultural science teacher, she helps kids with beef projects.

"We attend several shows from Fort Worth to Houston and generally have more than 20 kids with beef heifers, including many with Angus heifers, at these shows," she says. "We also work with students from third grade through eighth grade that are involved as junior FFA kids."

Witt has served as an FFA advisor for about 13 years, inspired to enter the teaching profession after she herself experienced the benefits of a strong agriculture program in high school. Today Witt helps students by guiding them through animal selection and proper feeding and grooming techniques and by teaching them how to be effective in the showing.

"Nearly half of our FFA membership is girls. We have a whole new generation of heifer moms in training," she says. "Their moms are also active and involved with the program, even though many have no prior experience. They are willing to learn to spend time with their kids."

Gilmer High School has no trouble generating interest in their beef program because of its track record.

"Older brothers and sisters speak highly of the program, so we don't have to do too much recruiting," she says. "Students also see pictures of their classmates in the newspaper when they win awards at livestock shows, and that also helps drum up interest in the program. We also get a tremendous amount of breeder support."

Witt offers moms (and dads) these tips for success.

- ▶ Be patient. Youth will experience success on their own level at some point, but that can take time.
- ▶ Spend time with your children on a daily basis, working with the cattle together. Start by making animal disposition a priority when selecting calves.
- ▶ Let your children gain experience without your presence. Allow your children to learn to correct themselves, and give them the time and space they need to do so.
- ▶ Be encouraging.
- ▶ "A dad once told me that showing cattle was the first activity his daughter had participated in that he could work with her rather than just watch. He was so proud to be included in that experience," Witt relates. "Showing cattle is something you can do as a family and know where your kids are and what they are doing. It is a positive experience, and that is why I am such an advocate of it."

What it takes

While Taylor struggles to put together a list of the qualities that make up today's heifer moms, she says some characteristics are required. Good heifer moms have an interest in cattle, a great deal of patience and the ability to baby talk heifers.

Taylor also says good heifer moms have an understanding of their kids and are cheerleaders, photographers and snack coordinators with good daily planners. But most of all, good heifer moms have the desire to watch their kids have fun.

"You have to have a good sense of humor. Moms can go ahead and be grossed out by ringworm and warts," Taylor says. "We were part of the tied-dyed heifers that the

Arkansas juniors led at the national show in Des Moines last summer.

The kids wore tied-dyed shirts and loved the 'Angus — Groovy, baby,' theme. But most of all, that group of kids had fun."

Taylor helps her girls have just as much fun at home on the ranch. From helping them look for eyebrows on heifers to experimenting with various hoof-paint colors and taking pictures, the Taylor girls and their cousins have fun while they learn to work with their heifers.

"My dad just shakes his head," Taylor laughs. "But I think it is important for the girls to not only learn how to groom cattle the right way, but to have some fun, too. If

you look in our showbox, you are just as likely to find a mirror, deodorant and a can of hairspray as you are a screwdriver. Dads don't always think about that stuff."

Taylor has found that other heifer moms have similar goals: to do whatever it takes to make sure kids have fun and succeed. "We moms are all alike," she says. "We can be a strong-willed bunch and get a lot done."

Learning about each other

Louisa Krebs, Whitestone-Krebs, Gordon, Neb., agrees that having fun is the key to being a good heifer mom. Labeled by Susan Taylor as the "original and eternal heifer mom," Krebs spent several years working with her son, Ty, and daughter, Kami, and their 4-H and Angus projects. The Krebses even centered vacations around the national junior show.

"Although (husband) Eldon generally went to the shows, there were times I hauled the kids to shows that were close by myself. I didn't know what I was doing. I just did it," she says. "I learned my 12-year-old son could change a tire on the truck, and I learned how to watch baby Kami while I helped Ty get ready for the showing.

"Looking back at those times is a little like looking back at childbirth," she continues. "You don't remember problems. You remember times when it was fun to load up the trailer and do something as a family. That's the best."

Krebs encourages heifer moms-in-training to take advantage of the time that can be spent with their children while working with cattle and traveling to shows. "You can have a lot of quality conversations for the hours you ride in a truck or sit at a



PHOTOS COURTESY OF SUSAN TAYLOR

► You might be a heifer mom if you give your children show barn survival kits for Christmas.

Heifers, youth need similar nurturing

When it comes right down to it, working with youth is not much different than working with Angus heifers. Susan (McMahon) Taylor offers her thoughts on the similarities.

► Heifer moms have been known to twist a few heifer tails to get the animals into the wash rack where water can roll off their backs. Heifer moms gently push their children to set and to reach goals and to learn to let troubles roll off their backs.

► Grooming skills are important for both child and heifer. Learning how to tease a heifer's tail for the showing is just as important as teaching children how to get their cowlicks under control.

► Occasionally, a heifer's halter chain is jerked to keep the animal in line. The heifer must be taught how to stand and behave in the showing. Heifer moms sometimes "jerk" their own children's chains to keep them in line and to learn to behave in public, too.

► Heifer moms have a herd instinct. They help prepare their children and their heifers for the showing and life beyond. Heifer moms help their children learn trust and safety rules, as well as learn to feed themselves and their animals. Children learn to interact appropriately with adults and how to sell and to promote their animal and their breed.

► Heifers and children both must be taught about leadership. Children learn how to become leaders from good examples, and heifer moms and others can be those examples. Whether heifers and kids stand first or last in class or life experiences, moms teach children how to win and to lose graciously.

show box," she says. "My kids are grown now, but they remember those as great times."

Krebs finds that moms also can serve in the role of "equalizer."

"Moms see the good in everything and can make sure that kids have a positive experience," Krebs says. "Moms see the bigger picture, rather than just the job at hand, and help children learn that responsibility comes at home and their hard work pays off at the shows."

Not just cattle

Both Taylor and Krebs recognize that not every heifer mom wants to work with cattle,

and they encourage moms to get involved with other activities.

"With all of the activities they have at the junior show, moms can get involved with the Cook-Off, public speaking and other events. That gets moms involved who might otherwise just sit in the stands," Krebs says.

"The best advice I have for moms is to learn how to back up the trailer before you leave home," Krebs quips. "Seriously, do not be overwhelmed. Showing cattle does not have to be rocket science. It's everyday work that you can learn to do as a family. That is part of the fun."



► Being a heifer mom takes a good sense of humor and the willingness to have a little fun. The Taylors helped with the tie-dyed heifers that the Arkansas juniors led at the 2000 NJAS in Des Moines. That group of kids had fun, Taylor says.